*SŪRAH* 49

# Al-Ḥujurāt
(Compartments)

## Prologue

This *sūrah*, composed of no more than 18 verses, is majestic, indeed superior. It includes a number of basic facts of faith, Islamic law and human existence. It opens up before our hearts and minds wide horizons and gives rise to a host of important thoughts. It refers to systems of formation and organization, principles of education and upbringing, fundamentals of legislation and essential directives which could take a hundred times its length. It puts before our eyes two great issues for reflection and deliberation.

The first thing that appears to us when we read this *sūrah* is that it lays down, almost independently, a complete sketch of a noble world, free of anything that may be described as unbecoming. It outlines the principles, concepts and approaches that form the foundation of this world, ensuring first that it comes into being, and then its continuity. This world derives its *raison d'etre* from God, looks up to God and is fit to be attributed to God. It is a world that combines purity of intention and feeling with a keen sense of propriety in what it says, feels and thinks. It maintains a high standard of morality and good manners in its dealings with God, His Messenger, its own affairs and interaction with others. This sense of morality penetrates into its deepest thoughts and manifests itself in its actions.

At the same time it has laws and regulations that ensure its continuity. These laws and regulations are based on its morality, emanate from it and fit with it. Thus this world benefits from such consistency of deep reality and surface appearance, the compatibility of its laws and feelings, the equilibrium between motives and checks, and the harmony between feelings and actions as it turns to God, appealing to Him. Hence, the existence and continuity of this noble and pure world are not left either to fine feelings and a sensitive conscience or to law and legislation. Nor are the establishment and maintenance of this world left to either the feelings and efforts of the individual or to the measures and systems of the state. Indeed, both individual and state have to work side by side, so that their efforts and duties complement each other in perfect harmony.

This world observes a certain code of behaviour with God and His Messenger, one that requires that everyone realizes his or her limits in relation to their Lord, and in relation to the Messenger who conveys His message: "*Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 1) Thus a servant of God does not precipitate His orders or prohibitions; nor does he or she suggest to Him any judgement or ruling. They neither exceed the limits of what God orders or prohibits, nor show that they have a will or an opinion independent from those of their Creator. This code is motivated by an attitude that combines fearing God with being modest and observing appropriate values in dealing with Him. Believers also observe special values when they address God's Messenger [peace be upon him]: "*Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it. Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them. Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. If they had the patience to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful.*" (Verses 2–5)

This noble world sets a well-defined approach for verifying what people may say or do, determining their accuracy before making any

judgement. This approach relies on fearing God and putting all matters to God's Messenger, without precipitating his judgement or suggesting to him what he has neither ordered nor recommended: "*Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action. And know that God's Messenger is among you. Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm. But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. [All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise.*" (Verses 6–8)

This noble world has its own rules and practical measures in sorting out any differences, conflicts and excesses that may occur within it, realizing that unless these are properly dealt with, they may undermine its very structure. Hence, it sets out certain procedures for dealing with them based on three main criteria: (1) that all believers are brethren; (2) that justice and peace must be maintained, and (3) that all believers are God-fearing and their goal is to earn God's pleasure and mercy. "*If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably with them. Indeed, God loves those who act equitably. All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy.*" (Verses 9–10)

Moreover, certain moral values apply in shaping the feelings of people in this world towards one another and in their behaviour towards each other. "*Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you deface one another, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers.*" (Verse 11)

It is a world with healthy feelings, guaranteed rights, where people's integrity is valued in both their presence and absence. No one is

condemned on suspicion. None seeks to publicize another's shortcomings. People's safety, security, integrity and freedom are fully respected by all. "*Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful.*" (Verse 12)

In this noble world a complete concept of mankind's unity, despite its divergent races and communities, prevails. A single standard of evaluation, free of prejudice and error, applies to all people. "*Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing. God is all-knowing, all-aware.*" (Verse 13)

Having presented these fundamental concepts that ensures this noble world maintains a high standard of purity, the *sūrah* embarks on drawing an outline of the faith by which believers are called upon to establish this world. Indeed, it is by their quality of faith that they are required to rise to the task and see to its fulfilment. This is the quality that distinguishes them from others and motivates them to respond and submit. They are addressed by their quality of having faith, '*Believers*!' Anyone who is so addressed by God will be so embarrassed not to give the right response. It is an address that makes any duty, hard and demanding as it may be, easy to fulfil. Indeed hearts will be all too eager to listen and respond: "*The Bedouin say: 'We have attained to faith.' Say [to them]: 'Believers you are not. Rather say, "We have submitted ourselves", for true faith has not entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste. God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful.' True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word. Say: Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verses 14–16)

Before it closes, the *sūrah* shows how great the favour God has bestowed on humanity is. It is the gift of faith with which God favours

people according to what He knows of what they deserve. "*They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: 'Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.' God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do.*" (Verses 17–18)

The second very important thing that appears clearly to us when we read the *sūrah* and review the actual events leading to its revelation is the great and unwavering effort, represented by Qur'ānic verses and the Prophet's directives, to establish and educate the first Muslim community. Indeed it is the community that represents that noble world, providing a practical model of it. Thus, it is no longer a mere ideal that lingers in people's dreams and imaginations.

This community, which existed during a certain period of history, did not come into existence suddenly or by chance. It did not owe its existence to a sudden change in the nature of all things. Instead, it went through a process of natural and slow growth, like a great tree that stretches its roots deep into the earth and spreads its branches wide into the air. It took the necessary time to complete its growth and benefited from steady and consistent effort to ensure that growth. Patient care, penetrating insight, careful motivation, steady encouragement and far-sighted strengthening were also provided. Moreover, it needed to go through hard and testing experiences and to learn important lessons from such experiences. In all this we see the kind of care God took of that community. He in His wisdom chose to fulfil a great trust, thus bringing His will to pass. Yet that community had its own virtues and potentials that only needed to be brought into full play. All this worked together to bring about such remarkable light in human history and to start, in reality, a situation that seems closer to an imaginary world.

## **Al-Ḥujurāt** (Compartments)

*In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful*

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all. (1)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تُقَدِّمُوا بَيْنَ يَدَيِ اللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ ۖ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١﴾

Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it. (2)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَرْفَعُوا أَصْوَاتَكُمْ فَوْقَ صَوْتِ النَّبِيِّ وَلَا تَجْهَرُوا لَهُ بِالْقَوْلِ كَجَهْرِ بَعْضِكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ أَنْ تَحْبَطَ أَعْمَالُكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٢﴾

Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them. (3)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَغُضُّونَ أَصْوَاتَهُمْ عِنْدَ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ امْتَحَنَ اللَّهُ قُلُوبَهُمْ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ ۚ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةٌ وَأَجْرٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٣﴾

Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. (4)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُنَادُونَكَ مِنْ وَرَاءِ الْحُجُرَاتِ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٤﴾

If they had the patience to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful. (5)

وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ صَبَرُوا حَتَّىٰ تَخْرُجَ إِلَيْهِمْ لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَهُمْ ۚ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿٥﴾

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِن جَآءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌۢ
بِنَبَإٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوٓا۟ أَن تُصِيبُوا۟ قَوْمًۢا بِجَهَٰلَةٍ
فَتُصْبِحُوا۟ عَلَىٰ مَا فَعَلْتُمْ نَٰدِمِينَ ﴿٦﴾

Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action. (6)

وَٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ فِيكُمْ رَسُولَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ لَوْ يُطِيعُكُمْ
فِى كَثِيرٍ مِّنَ ٱلْأَمْرِ لَعَنِتُّمْ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ حَبَّبَ
إِلَيْكُمُ ٱلْإِيمَٰنَ وَزَيَّنَهُۥ فِى قُلُوبِكُمْ وَكَرَّهَ
إِلَيْكُمُ ٱلْكُفْرَ وَٱلْفُسُوقَ وَٱلْعِصْيَانَ ۚ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلرَّٰشِدُونَ ﴿٧﴾

And know that God's Messenger is among you. Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm. But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. (7)

فَضْلًا مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَنِعْمَةً ۚ وَٱللَّهُ
عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٨﴾

[All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise. (8)

وَإِن طَآئِفَتَانِ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ٱقْتَتَلُوا۟
فَأَصْلِحُوا۟ بَيْنَهُمَا ۖ فَإِنۢ بَغَتْ إِحْدَىٰهُمَا
عَلَى ٱلْأُخْرَىٰ فَقَٰتِلُوا۟ ٱلَّتِى تَبْغِى حَتَّىٰ تَفِىٓءَ
إِلَىٰٓ أَمْرِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ فَإِن فَآءَتْ فَأَصْلِحُوا۟
بَيْنَهُمَا بِٱلْعَدْلِ وَأَقْسِطُوٓا۟ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ
ٱلْمُقْسِطِينَ ﴿٩﴾

If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably with them. Indeed, God loves those who act equitably. (9)

All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy. (10)

إِنَّمَا ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِخْوَةٌ فَأَصْلِحُوا۟ بَيْنَ
أَخَوَيْكُمْ ۚ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame yourselves, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers. (11)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَا يَسْخَرْ قَوْمٌ مِّن قَوْمٍ
عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَكُونُوا۟ خَيْرًا مِّنْهُمْ وَلَا نِسَآءٌ مِّن
نِّسَآءٍ عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَكُنَّ خَيْرًا مِّنْهُنَّ ۖ وَلَا تَلْمِزُوٓا۟
أَنفُسَكُمْ وَلَا تَنَابَزُوا۟ بِٱلْأَلْقَٰبِ ۖ بِئْسَ
ٱلِٱسْمُ ٱلْفُسُوقُ بَعْدَ ٱلْإِيمَٰنِ ۚ وَمَن لَّمْ
يَتُبْ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ﴿١١﴾

Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful. (12)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱجْتَنِبُوا۟ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ ٱلظَّنِّ
إِنَّ بَعْضَ ٱلظَّنِّ إِثْمٌ ۖ وَلَا تَجَسَّسُوا۟ وَلَا
يَغْتَب بَّعْضُكُم بَعْضًا ۚ أَيُحِبُّ أَحَدُكُمْ
أَن يَأْكُلَ لَحْمَ أَخِيهِ مَيْتًا فَكَرِهْتُمُوهُ ۚ
وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ تَوَّابٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَٰكُم مِّن ذَكَرٍ
وَأُنثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَٰكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَآئِلَ
لِتَعَارَفُوٓا۟ ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ
أَتْقَىٰكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١٣﴾

Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing. God is all-knowing, all-aware. (13)

قَالَتِ ٱلْأَعْرَابُ ءَامَنَّا ۖ قُل لَّمْ تُؤْمِنُوا۟
وَلَٰكِن قُولُوٓا۟ أَسْلَمْنَا وَلَمَّا يَدْخُلِ
ٱلْإِيمَٰنُ فِى قُلُوبِكُمْ ۖ وَإِن تُطِيعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ
وَرَسُولَهُۥ لَا يَلِتْكُم مِّنْ أَعْمَٰلِكُمْ
شَيْـًٔا ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٤﴾

The Bedouin say: "We have attained to faith." Say [to them]: "Believers you are not. Rather say, 'We have submitted ourselves', for true faith has not entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste. God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful." (14)

إِنَّمَا ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ
وَرَسُولِهِۦ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَرْتَابُوا۟ وَجَٰهَدُوا۟
بِأَمْوَٰلِهِمْ وَأَنفُسِهِمْ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلصَّٰدِقُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word. (15)

قُلْ أَتُعَلِّمُونَ ٱللَّهَ بِدِينِكُمْ وَٱللَّهُ
يَعْلَمُ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ
وَٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٦﴾

Say: "Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything." (16)

يَمُنُّونَ عَلَيْكَ أَنْ أَسْلَمُوا ۖ قُلْ لَا تَمُنُّوا عَلَيَّ إِسْلَامَكُمْ ۖ بَلِ اللَّهُ يَمُنُّ عَلَيْكُمْ أَنْ هَدَاكُمْ لِلْإِيمَانِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: "Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth." (17)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ غَيْبَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ بَصِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do. (18)

**Refining Rough Manners**

> *Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all. Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it. Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them. Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. If they had the patience to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful.* (Verses 1–5)

The *sūrah* starts with this first loving address that aims to alert hearts: "*Believers!*" It is an address by God to those who believe in Him, touching their hearts by highlighting the bond they have with Him, making them aware that they belong to Him, carry His mark, do His bidding and are His soldiers. They realize that they are in this world for a purpose He wants to accomplish. If He has made faith appealing to them and seem beautiful in their eyes, as part of His favour, it behoves them to stand

where He wants them to be, awaiting His orders and judgement. They should be glad to do His bidding in full submission to Him: *"Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all."* (Verse 1)

Believers, do not make any suggestion to God or His Messenger, concerning any of your affairs or of life in general. Do not presume to have a say in any matter before God has stated, through His Messenger, what He wants concerning it. Do not attempt to judge any matter unless you first refer to what God and His Messenger say.

Qatādah says: "It has been reported that some people used to say: 'If there was some revelation concerning such and such,' or, 'If it could thus be true.' God disliked such suggestions." Al-'Awfī says: "They were told not to start speaking in his presence." Mujāhid says: "The verse orders believers not to precipitate what the Prophet might say. They must wait until God made His judgement clear through His Messenger." Al-Dhaḥḥāk says: "Do not make a judgement on any question relating to your faith without waiting for the judgement of God and His Messenger." Ibn 'Abbās is reported to have said: "Do not say anything that is not in line with the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*."

Thus, we see that it is all a question of a psychological attitude defining the standards to be observed in relation to God and His Messenger, and the process by which instructions are received and carried out. This is an essential part of how Islamic law is enacted and implemented. It is all based on an essential God-fearing quality and its reinforcement. This quality stems from the awareness that God hears all and knows all. Furthermore, this all-embracing truth is incorporated into one single, short verse.

The believers applied this standard to their relationship with their Lord and His Messenger. None of them would ever presume to suggest anything to God or His Messenger. None would voice an opinion unless God's Messenger asked him to do so. None would make a judgement concerning any matter without first referring to what God and His Messenger said about it.

Imām Aḥmad, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah relate that the Prophet asked Mu'ādh when he appointed him Governor of Yemen: "How will you judge?" Mu'ādh said: "According to God's book." The

Prophet asked: "What if you do not find in it what you need?" Mu'ādh answered: "Then according to the Sunnah of God's Messenger." Again the Prophet asked: "And if you do not find something relevant in that?" Mu'ādh replied: "In this case, I will exercise my judgement as best as I can." The Prophet put his hand on Mu'ādh's chest and said: "Praise be to God for guiding the messenger of God's Messenger to what pleases His Messenger." After the revelation of this verse, the Prophet might ask his Companions about their day and the places they had been to, but even then, they would hesitate to give an answer other than: "God and His Messenger know best." They feared that a direct answer might be treated as presumption in the presence of God and His Messenger.

**When Speaking to the Prophet**

In a *ḥadīth* reported by Abū Bakarah Nafi' ibn al-Ḥārith mentions that during his pilgrimage, the Prophet asked his Companions: "'Which month is this?' We said: 'God and His Messenger know best.' He was silent until we thought that he would give it a different name. But he said: 'Is it not Dhū'l-Ḥijjah?' We said: 'Yes.' He then asked: 'Which city is this?' We said: 'God and His Messenger know best.' Again, he was silent until we thought that he would call it by a different name, but then he said: 'Is it not the sanctified city?' We said: 'Yes, indeed.' So he went on and asked: 'What day is today?' We replied: 'God and His Messenger know best.' Once more he remained silent until we thought that he would give it a different name, but then he said: 'Is it not the day of sacrifice?' We answered in the affirmative..." This is, then, an example of the standard the Prophet's Companions achieved in their God-fearing manners when they heard this instruction coupled with the order to maintain their fear of God, who hears all and knows all.

The second aspect of good manners concerned the Prophet's Companions' own discourse with him and the respect they should feel and show. This was to be observed in how they spoke to him and in the level of their voices. This was how they should manifest their respect for the Prophet as they sat with him. As God drew their attention to this requirement, He addressed them by that quality they loved to have and warned them that violation of His orders might bring grievous

consequences in its wake: *"Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it."* (Verse 2)

This kindly address coupled with its awesome warning had their profound effect on the Prophet's Companions. Al-Bukhārī reports that Abū Mulaykah said: "The two goodly ones, Abū Bakr and 'Umar [may God be pleased with them], were in a perilous situation, as they raised their voices in the presence of the Prophet. When the delegation of the Tamīm tribe arrived [in the ninth year of the Islamic calendar] one of them suggested al-Aqra' ibn Ḥābis [to be appointed as their chief], while the other suggested another man. [One reporter says that he does not remember the name of this second man, while another reporter mentions that he was al-Qa'qā' ibn Ma'bad.] Abū Bakr said to 'Umar: 'You merely want to oppose me.' The other replied: 'I do not wish to oppose you.' They were soon speaking loudly. The verse was revealed saying: *'Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it.'* (Verse 2) Ibn al-Zubayr says that after its revelation 'Umar would hardly use an audible voice when he spoke to the Prophet until the Prophet asked him to speak up. It is also reported that when this verse was revealed, Abū Bakr said to the Prophet: 'God's Messenger, I will only speak to you in a whisper.'

Imām Aḥmad relates on the authority of Anas ibn Mālik that when this verse was revealed, Thābit ibn Qays, a man with a high-pitched voice thought: "I was the one who raised his voice in the presence of God's Messenger. I am destined to hell, because my deeds have come to waste." He stayed at home depressed. The Prophet noticed his absence and asked about him. Some people went to him and told him that the Prophet had asked about his absence. He said to them: "I am the one who raised his voice above the voice of the Prophet and spoke loudly to him. All my deeds are wasted. I am destined to hell." They went to the Prophet informing him of what Thābit had said. The Prophet said: "No. He certainly belongs to heaven." Anas says: "We subsequently saw him walking among us, knowing that he was certain to go to heaven."

Thus they felt a tremor in their hearts as they listened to this endearing address and its stern warning. Hence, they observed a high standard of fine manners in the Prophet's presence for fear that their deeds would come to nothing.

God praises their piety and lowered voices when they are with the Prophet in an unusual expression: *"Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them."* (Verse 3) Piety that manifests itself in a God-fearing attitude is a great gift God grants to certain hearts He chooses after initially testing them. It is thus implanted only in hearts that are suited to it, having first proven their merit. Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are they who have proven themselves in a test of hearts. They are the ones who fear God, a quality that earns them forgiveness and a rich reward from God.

Here, then, is a tempting invitation that follows a stern warning. Both are part of how God educated and prepared his chosen servants for the great task that first generation of Muslims undertook.

It is reported that 'Umar heard two people speaking loudly in the Prophet's Mosque. He went to them and said: "Do you realize where you are? Where do you come from?" They said to him: "We come from Ṭā'if." He said: "Had you been from Madīnah, I would have had you soundly beaten."

Islamic scholars, having realized the extent of this injunction, state that it is reprehensible to raise one's voice near the Prophet's grave in the same way as it was reprehensible to do so in his presence. In this way, Muslims demonstrate their respect for the Prophet in all situations.

The ninth year of the Islamic calendar is called 'The year of delegations' because delegations from all over Arabia arrived in Madīnah to embrace Islam and pledge their loyalty to the Prophet. The *sūrah* refers to an incident that took place that year when the delegation of Tamīm arrived. These were unrefined Bedouins. They shouted to the Prophet from outside his wives' apartments that were situated next to the mosque: "Muḥammad, come out and speak to us!" The Prophet disliked their uncivilized manner. Hence, the next verse of the *sūrah* was revealed: *"Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. If they had the patience*

*to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful.*" (Verses 4–5)

Thus does God describe most of them as being without reason. He censures their calling out to the Prophet in a way that is contrary to the sort of respect that should be shown to God's Messenger, the leader and educator of the community of believers. He explains to them that it better behoved them to wait patiently until the Prophet came out to them of his own accord. Furthermore, the *sūrah* highlights to them the value of repentance, making it clear that they should seek God's forgiveness and pray to Him to bestow His mercy on them.

Muslims have shown their awareness of this high standard of refinement, extending it to every teacher and scholar. They would not disturb their teachers or impose themselves on them until they came out or called them in. Abū 'Ubayd, a pious and reliable scholar of *Ḥadīth*, says: "I never knocked at the door of any scholar, but waited patiently until he came out in his own good time."

### Making Sure Before Taking Action

> *Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action. And know that God's Messenger is among you. Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm. But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. [All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise.* (Verses 6–8)

The first address in the *sūrah* defines the leadership and the source from which to receive orders. The second establishes the standards of manners and respect to be maintained in dealing with this leadership. Both serve as the basis for all legislations and directives that follow in the *sūrah*. It is imperative for the source and the leadership to be well defined so that directives and instructions be given their true value and

so that they are properly obeyed. Hence, the third address explains to the believers how to receive news and reports and the need to verify their reliability. *"Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action."* (Verse 6)

The verse specifically mentions the evildoer because he is more likely to lie. It is important that suspicion should not be widely spread in the Muslim community. If every report is doubted, the system of gathering intelligence and information becomes paralyzed. In a Muslim community, individuals are normally treated as trustworthy, and the information they bring is considered reliable. An evildoer is treated differently: his information is not accepted until it is verified. Thus, the community steers a middle way between accepting and rejecting the information relayed to it. The community does not rush into action on the basis of a report given by someone whose behaviour leaves much to be desired. Such rash action might lead to committing a wrong against other people, and subsequent regret. Furthermore, such rash action may incur God's displeasure and put the community in a position of committing an injustice.

A number of commentators on the Qur'ān mention that this verse specifically referred to al-Walīd ibn 'Uqbah ibn Abū Mu'ayṭ when the Prophet sent him to collect *zakāt* from the tribe of al-Muṣṭalaq. Ibn Kathīr quotes a report by Mujāhid and Qatādah, stating: "God's Messenger sent al-Walīd ibn 'Uqbah to al-Muṣṭalaq tribe to collect their *zakāt* and they paid it to him. When he returned he reported to the Prophet that the tribe was raising a force to attack the Muslims. [In his report, Qatādah also states that al-Walīd added that the al-Muṣṭalaq tribe had renounced the Islamic faith.] The Prophet then sent Khālid ibn al-Walīd to them, ordering him to make sure of the information before taking any action. Khālid so went out to them arriving at night and sending out a number of soldiers to gather information. When they returned, they reported to him that the tribe were adhering to their Islamic faith and that they heard the call to prayer and saw people praying. In the morning, Khālid made his appearance at the tribe's quarters and saw what pleased him. He then returned to the Prophet and reported all this to him. Thereafter, this verse was then revealed."

Qatādah says that the Prophet used to say afterwards: "Verification complies with God's orders, while haste comes from Satan."

The import of this verse is general, making it clear that checking the accuracy of reports given by suspect people is necessary. On the other hand, a report by a God-fearing person is taken as correct, because this is the normal state of affairs in the Muslim community. A report by an evildoer is the exception, not the norm. Indeed, accepting reports by God-fearing people is part of proper verification and checking. To make doubt the norm, applicable to all sources and reports, is contrary to the principle of trust that is basic to the Muslim community. Furthermore, it could easily cause disruption in its life. Islam allows life to run its normal course while putting in place certain controls that guarantee its protection. Here we see how this operates in practice.

## Making Life Too Hard

It appears that some Muslims wanted to take immediate action when they heard the first news reported by al-Walīd ibn 'Uqbah. They advised the Prophet to immediately punish the al-Muṣṭalaq tribe. In doing so, they were motivated by a keen desire to ensure the status of Islam and to act against those who refused to pay *zakāt*. The next verse reminds them of the great blessing they had, namely the Prophet's presence in their midst. They should appreciate this blessing and be always mindful of its importance: "*And know that God's Messenger is among you.*" (Verse 7)

This is a reality that we can very easily imagine because it actually happened. However, when we reflect on it, we see that it is superior, beyond imagination. Is it easy to imagine a continuous, dynamic contact between heaven and earth, witnessed by all, whereby heaven speaks to people on earth about their public and private affairs, correcting their errors one by one, and giving them advice about their most intimate affairs? Any one of them might do or say something, or even entertain a thought, and yet heaven is aware of it all. What happens next is that God informs His Messenger of what has taken place and directs him to do or say whatever is necessary about it. This is something so great that it might not be fully appreciated by some of those present at the time. Hence, they are reminded of it in this particular way: "*And know*

*that God's Messenger is among you.*" (Verse 7) In other words, be aware of this fact and give it its due importance.

One outcome of this new-found knowledge is that they must not act presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. The Qur'ān, however, puts this even more lucidly and forcefully, telling the Muslims that what God's Messenger decides on any matter, on the basis of God's revelation or inspiration, is good for them as it combines ease and mercy. Had God's Messenger obeyed all their thoughts, they would have found matters far more difficult. God is more aware than them of what is of benefit to them. His Messenger represents mercy in everything he chooses for them: "*Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm.*" (Verse 7) This implies that they should leave all their affairs in the hands of God and His Messenger. They should submit fully, surrendering themselves to God's will, implementing His orders as they receive them, and suggesting nothing to God's Messenger.

The *sūrah* then draws their attention to the grace of faith He guided them to, making their hearts warm to it as He revealed its beauty and benefit such that they would love it dearly. He has also made unbelief, wrongdoing and sin hateful to them. All this is part of God's grace which He bestows on them: "*But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. [All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise.*" (Verses 7–8)

That God should select certain individuals from among His servants and grant them all this represents His immeasurable bounty and grace. Indeed, all other types of grace and bounty, including that which brings people into existence and gives them life, seem to dwindle by comparison to what faith represents. Later in the *sūrah* we will look in detail at God's words: "*It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.*" (Verse 17)

What is particularly significant here is that they are reminded that it is God who has willed that they should have all this bounty. It is He who has rid their hearts of all the evil of unbelief, wrongdoing and sin. It is He who willed that they should follow the right course, bestowing

on them His favours and bounty. All this He does in His wisdom and full knowledge of the truth. Again stating this truth implies that they should submit themselves to God's direction and planning, trusting that it is always for their own good. They should stop making suggestions and rushing hastily into what they consider to be good, before God has made His choice for them. God's Messenger takes them by the hand to gain all this goodness.

Man is hasty, but he is unaware of the likely consequences of his precipitate action. Man may also make suggestions concerning his own or other people's affairs, without knowing whether his suggestions will bring benefit or cause harm: "*Yet man prays for evil as eagerly as he prays for good. Truly man is ever hasty.*" (17: 11) If man would only submit himself to God, accepting what God chooses for him, knowing that God's choice is better, more compassionate and beneficial for him than what he may choose for himself, he would be much more comfortable. He would complete this short journey on this planet with ease and contentment. But this is also an aspect of God's grace which He grants to whomever He wills.

### Fighting Between Muslim Believers

> *If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably with them. Indeed, God loves those who act equitably. All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy.* (Verses 9–10)

This is a practical rule to protect the community of believers from strife resulting from excesses and hard feelings. This rule is given immediately after the requirement to verify the reports given by evildoers, making sure that the believers do not rush into action that may be counterproductive. Whether this verse was revealed in consequence

of a particular case, as some reports suggest, or whether it was merely initiating a piece of legislation to outline what the Muslim community should do in such cases, it nonetheless provides a general and highly effective rule that stamps out strife and ensures solidarity within the Muslim community. It also establishes justice, rightness and fairness. All this is based on believers being God-fearing and their hope that He will bestow His grace on a community that deals with justice and works for reconciliation.

The Qur'ān either supposes or confronts the possibility of two groups of believers taking up arms against each other, yet it accepts that both are believers, even though one of them, or indeed both of them, may be in the wrong. It requires the Muslim community, other than the two fighting groups, to work for reconciliation between the two. But if one of them acts wrongfully, refusing to give up what it has no right to claim, or indeed if both act wrongfully, refusing reconciliation or refusing to abide by God's law over that which they dispute, then the believers must fight those who act wrongfully until they revert to God's commandment. The commandment at issue here is the ending of strife and conflict between believers and accepting God's judgement over anything contentious. Should those acting wrongfully revert to God's commandment, then the believers should establish reconciliation based on strict justice and equity, in obedience of God and seeking His pleasure: "*God loves those who act equitably.*" (Verse 9)

This judgement is followed by a touch that aims to bring out genuine feelings of brotherhood among believers. It is the bond that unites them after they have fallen out. They are also reminded of the need to always be God-fearing, suggesting that this is the only way to earn His grace. "*All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy.*" (Verse 10)

The correlation of this is that love, peace, cooperation and unity are the essential characteristics of a Muslim community. Conflict and fighting are exceptions that must be dealt with as soon as they occur in order to bring about reconciliation and peace. For this end, it is permissible for other Muslims to fight those of their brethren who act

wrongfully towards others; this so as to bring them back into the fold and restore the proper situation. This is certainly a tough and decisive measure.

This rule also provides that no wounded man in such battles may be finished off, and no captive may be killed. Those who lay down their arms and flee the battlefield cannot be pursued. Furthermore, the property of the group in the wrong may not be looted. The purpose of fighting them is not to finish them off, but rather to bring them back into line with the rest of the Muslim community.

In the right order of things, all Muslims of the world should have one leader. Once a pledge of loyalty is given to a leader to rule over the Muslim community as a whole, and another person claims such leadership for himself, this claimant should be killed. He and his supporters are considered rebels whom believers should fight alongside their leader. It was on this basis that Imām ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib fought those who rebelled in the battles of the Camel and Ṣiffīn. Many of the Prophet's distinguished Companions fought alongside him. However, a small number including Saʿd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Muḥammad ibn Maslamah, Usāmah ibn Zayd and ʿAbdullāh ibn ʿUmar chose not to engage in the battle, either because they could not determine which side was right or because, as al-Jaṣṣāṣ says, they felt that Imām ʿAlī had clear superiority and hence their absence would not affect the result. The first probability is clearly the stronger, especially as this is borne out by some of their reported statements. Ibn ʿUmar, for example, is reported to have expressed regret for not fighting alongside ʿAlī.

This proper state of affairs, whereby the Muslims have only one leader, should be the norm in all situations, including those exceptional situations when two or more political rulers are in power in different and separate Muslim areas. It is the duty of Muslims to fight on the side of the single ruler against the group acting wrongfully, if they rebel against his authority, or if one group acts wrongfully towards another group without rebelling against the Muslim ruler *per se*. It is also the duty of Muslims to fight such rebels if they affiliate themselves to a political ruler in a situation where more than one Muslim ruler is in power. All Muslims must close ranks and stand against those acting wrongfully

until they revert to God's commandment. In this way, this text remains operational in all situations.

It is clear that this system, based on arbitration and fighting the group in the wrong until they revert to God's commandment, precedes all human attempts in this regard. Moreover, it is free of all the flaws and shortcomings inherent in defective human endeavours. Moreover, it incorporates qualities of purity, honesty and absolute justice. The arbitration that it calls for is based on operating God's orders, which are equitable, free of any prejudice and defect. Alas for mankind! They look on, but go away limping and stumbling when the clear, paved and straight way beckons to them.

**No Ridicule, Defamation or Insult**

> *Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame yourselves, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers.* (Verse 11)

The human society Islam establishes in the light of Qur'ānic guidance operates a high standard of manners. Every individual in this society has his or her integrity, which may not be compromised. Indeed, it is part of the integrity of the whole community. To slander anyone is to slander oneself, because the whole community is a single entity and its integrity is one.

In this verse, the Qur'ān again addresses the believers by their most beloved description, "*Believers*". It forbids that one group should deride another, be they men deriding other men, or women deriding other women. For how can they know whether or not the ones they deride enjoy a better status with God?

The way this order is expressed suggests that the apparent values that men or women may consider important may not be those that

give people their real status. There are other values, which people may not know about. These are known to God who operates them in fairness. A rich man may deride a poor one. Similarly, those who are strong, enjoying good health, intelligence, children and support, may deride those who are less fortunate than themselves, such as those who are weak, handicapped, simple-minded, childless or orphans without support. A woman who sees herself as pretty, young, perfectly shaped, or rich may deride another for being ugly, old, misshaped, or poor. But none of these earthly values is of any importance as a criterion of high status. In God's sight, people are raised in rank on the basis of totally different values.

The Qur'ān, however, does not stop at implying this. It works on the sentiment of brotherhood in faith, reminding the believers that they descend from a single soul. Whoever defames anyone actually defames all. Hence, the Qur'ān says: *"Neither shall you defame yourselves."* (Verse 11) It should be mentioned that the word the Qur'ān uses for defaming, *talmizū*, has a particular resonance that imparts a feeling that also has a physical effect.

Part of derision and defamation is to call others names that they dislike, or feel to be meant as ridicule. It is the right of a believer not to be called by a name that he or she dislikes, or feels to suggest disrespect. Moreover, Islamic standards require a believer not to call a brother or a sister by such a name that gives them pain. The Prophet changed the names or nicknames of some of his Companions because he felt, with his refined sense and compassionate heart, that they could bring ridicule or pain to the people concerned.

Having outlined the true values in God's measure, and appealed to feelings of brotherhood and of belonging to one soul, the *sūrah* now reaches out to the believers' sense of faith, warning them that they will lose this noble quality if they indulge in derision and ridicule: *"Nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed."* (Verse 11) To indulge in this is akin to renouncing faith after one has believed. The *sūrah* goes even further than this by threatening to consider this an act of wrongdoing, something that is often expressed in the Qur'ān as being synonymous with associating partners with God. *"Those who do*

*not repent are indeed wrongdoers.*" (Verse 11) Thus, the *sūrah* establishes the rules for refined manners in a noble community.

**No Suspicion or Backbiting**

> *Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful.* (Verse 12)

This verse establishes yet another fence in this noble society, protecting the integrity and freedom of individuals, while at the same time teaching people how to cleanse their feelings and consciences. Following the pattern of the *sūrah*, it begins with the endearing address, "*Believers*". It follows this by issuing an order to avoid most suspicion, so that they do not leave themselves open to thoughts of doubt about others. It justifies this order by saying that some suspicion is sinful. Since the prohibition applies to most suspicion and the rule is that some suspicion is sinful, then the verse implies that all negative suspicion should be avoided, because no one knows which part of his or her doubts are sinful.

Thus the Qur'ān purges a Muslim's inner conscience so that it is not contaminated with evil suspicion and consequently incurs sin. It leaves it clean, free of doubt, entertaining only friendly and affectionate thoughts towards one's brethren. In this way it steers society away from suspicion so that the community enjoys reassurance and is not marred by worry and apprehension. Life in a community where ill thoughts have no place is both serene and comfortable.

Islam does not, however, stop at this point in educating people's hearts and souls. The verse we are looking at establishes a principle that applies to people's dealings with each other. It protects the rights of those who live in its pure society so that they are not punished or tried on the basis of suspicion. Indeed, suspicion does not even form a proper basis for interrogating people or investigating their affairs. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "If you have doubts, do not investigate." [Related by al-Ṭabarānī.] What this means is that people remain innocent, enjoying

all their rights, freedom and status until it is absolutely clear that they have committed some offence. It is not sufficient just to suspect them of having committed something so they are then pursued with the aim of establishing whether they are guilty or not.

This verse shows us the limit to which Islam goes in protecting people's freedom, integrity, rights and status. How does this compare with what even the best democratic countries boast of with regard to protecting human rights? This standard, which the Qur'ān sets for believers, is far superior indeed. Moreover, Islam achieves this in real life, after it establishes it in people's hearts and consciences.

The verse moves on to lay down another principle that provides social guarantees: "*And do not spy on one another.*" (Verse 12) Spying may be an action that follows immediately on entertaining suspicion. On the other hand, it may be an independent action that seeks to look at other people's faults and errors. The Qur'ān opposes spying because it is morally base. It aims to purge people's hearts from sinking into this vile pursuit in order to keep up its high moral standards.

Yet the order goes beyond this. It states an essential principle of the Islamic social system and its legislative measures. People are entitled to have their freedom and integrity respected. These should not be violated or encroached upon in any way.

In an Islamic society people enjoy a high standard of values. They enjoy security in their lives, homes and personal affairs. Nothing whatsoever justifies any violation of these. Indeed, the investigation of a crime does not provide, in the Islamic system, justification for spying on people. We take people by their appearances, and no one is entitled to delve into others' affairs. Indeed, people may not be taken to task except for what is evident of their offences. No one may suspect, anticipate or even know that others are secretly committing some violation and resort to spying on them so as to establish this as a fact or to catch them red-handed. All that may be done against such people is that they be put to trial when they actually commit a crime.

Some people said to 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd, a learned scholar and a Companion of the Prophet: "We saw this man with his beard dripping wine." He said: "We have been forbidden to spy. If we see something

evident, we act on it." [Related by Abū Dāwūd.] Mujāhid says: "Do not spy on one another. Take people on the basis of what is apparent and do not look into what God has left concealed."

Imām Aḥmad quotes Dujayn, a clerk employed by 'Uqbah, saying: "I said to 'Uqbah that we have neighbours who drink and I want to call the police to take them to account." He said to me: "Do not do that. What you should do is to advise and warn them." Dujayn did this but his neighbours persisted in their prohibited ways. So he said to 'Uqbah again: "I have warned them, but they will not desist. I am calling the police." 'Uqbah said to him: "Do not do that. I heard the Prophet say: 'Whoever keeps to himself a fault of another believer is like one who rescues a girl buried alive.'" [Also related by Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasā'ī.]

Abū Dāwūd quotes Mu'āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān as saying: "I heard the Prophet saying: 'If you pursue people's faults you corrupt them, or almost corrupt them'." Abū al-Dardā', a learned Companion of the Prophet, said: "This is a word Mu'āwiyah has heard from the Prophet, and God has enabled him to benefit by it."

Thus was the divine order implemented in practical life. It did not stop at being a form of practical education to purge hearts and consciences. It became like a fence protecting people's rights, freedom and sanctity, so that they could not be touched under any pretext. Far superior is this level to any achieved today, 1,400 years later, even by those societies which respect human rights and freedom most.

Next comes the order that forbids backbiting. This is given in such a way that it provides a graphic description of the disgusting nature of this action: *"Nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it."* (Verse 12) The order tells Muslims that they must not backbite. It then paints a scene that fills even the most insensitive of people with disgust, showing someone eating his dead brother's flesh. It immediately declares that they have, of course, a very strong and natural aversion to such behaviour. Hence, they also have a strong aversion against backbiting.

Following all these prohibitions against suspicion, spying and backbiting, the *sūrah* awakens believers' God-fearing instinct, inviting

anyone who has committed any of these unlawful acts to hasten and repent in the hope of God's mercy: *"And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful."* (Verse 12)

Once again we say that this text is meant in practice to be like a high boundary protecting people's sanctity and integrity. It provides Muslims with a profound sense of morality. The Prophet follows the Qur'ān's example in making backbiting appear so disgusting. Abū Hurayrah reports that the Prophet was asked to define backbiting. He said: "To say about your brother something he dislikes." Someone asked: "Suppose that what I say is true of my brother." The Prophet answered: "If you say what is true, you are guilty of backbiting; but if it is untrue, you are guilty of wilful defamation." [Related by al-Tirmidhī who states that it is authentic.]

'Ā'ishah reports that she said to the Prophet: "It is enough that Ṣafiyyah [another wife of the Prophet] is so and so [referring to the fact that she is short]." The Prophet said to her: "You have said a word that would contaminate the entire volume of seawater." She added that she imitated someone to him, but he said: "I would rather not imitate anyone, even if I would get so and so for it." [Related by Abū Dāwūd.]

Anas ibn Mālik quotes the Prophet as saying: "When I was taken on my ascension to heaven, I passed by people with copper nails, scratching their faces and chests. I said: 'Gabriel, who are these?' He said: 'These are the ones who eat the flesh of others and detract from their honour.'" [Related by Abū Dāwūd.]

Mā'iz and the Ghāmidī woman confessed to the Prophet that they had committed adultery, insisting that the Prophet should administer the mandatory punishment to cleanse them. Hence he ordered that they be stoned. The Prophet subsequently heard one man say to another: "Have you seen this man whose offence God has concealed? Yet he insisted on being punished until he was stoned like a dog." The Prophet marched on with his Companions and soon passed by a dead donkey. He asked for the two men, and when they came forward, he said to them: "Get down and eat of this." Shocked, the two men said: "May God forgive you, Messenger of God! Is this something to be eaten?" He said: "What you said about your brother a short while ago is even more disgusting

than eating of this. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, he is now in heaven being bathed in its waters." [Related by Ibn Kathīr in his commentary on the Qur'ān.]

With such consistent treatment the Muslim community was purged and attained its high standard. It became like a dream that came true, a model to be followed and relished.

**The Brotherhood of Mankind**

Having addressed the believers in such a way as to elevate them to a superior level of refined manners and morality, the *sūrah* then addresses all mankind, of all races, colours and communities, reminding them that they all share one origin. One standard applies to them all: it is the same one that elevates the Muslim community to its superior level of unparalleled purity.

> *Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing. God is all-knowing, all-aware.* (Verse 13)

All of you people, who present such different races and colours, communities and tribes, come from one origin. Hence, you should not divide into groups or fall out with each other and so waste your energy.

Mankind! You are being called by the One who created you out of a male and a female to inform you of the purpose of making you into nations and tribes. It is not so that you stir up conflict and enmity. It is rather for the purpose of getting to know one another and living peacefully together. Differences of language, colour, temperament, manners, talents and abilities do not lead to conflict and strife. In fact, they make for cooperation so that all tasks are fulfilled and all needs met. Colour, race, language, homeland and similar factors are of no importance in God's sight. There is only one criterion to determine people's worth: "*The noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is*

*most genuinely God-fearing.*" (Verse 13) Noble indeed is the one who is noble in God's sight. He gives you your value on the basis of His perfect knowledge and His awareness of values and measures: "*God is all-knowing, all-aware.*" (Verse 13) Thus all dividing factors and values are discounted leaving only one measure and one value by which all mankind are tested.

Thus all reasons for conflict and quarrel on earth disappear, all considerations coveted by human beings lose their value. In their place, an important and distinctly clear reason for friendship and cooperation looms large: that is, God's Lordship of all and the fact that He has created all mankind from the same origin. A single banner is raised so that all compete to line up under it. That is the banner of fearing God alone. This is the banner raised by Islam in order to save humanity from the evil consequences of fanatic bonds of race, homeland, tribe, clan, family, etc. All these belong to the world of ignorance, or *Jāhiliyyah*, although they may take up different names, colours and fashions. In essence, though, they are ties of ignorance that have nothing to do with Islam.

Islam has fought ignorant fanaticism in all its forms and shapes so as to establish its world system under God's banner alone. In Islam, banners of nationality and race have neither place nor value. The Prophet said: "All of you descend from Adam, and Adam was created out of clay. Those people who seek pride in their ancestry should desist, or else God will bring them as low as beetles, or even lower." [Related by al-Bazzār on the authority of Hudhayfah.] Referring to the bonds valued in pre-Islamic days, the Prophet said: "Leave these altogether, because they stink." [Related by Muslim.]

This is the foundation of Islamic society: a human and global society. Humanity may stretch all its imagination and exert its best efforts to achieve even one aspect of it, but it fails because it does not follow the clear and straight road leading to it, as defined by God, and because it does not raise God's banner which unites us all.

## The Meaning of True Faith

As the *sūrah* draws to its end, it fittingly explains the truth of faith in reply to those Bedouins who claimed to be believers when they did not

even understand the nature of faith. This also serves as a reply to those who tried to press their acceptance of Islam as a favour they thought they did for the Prophet. In essence, they do not appreciate that it is only through God's favour that people believe.

> *The Bedouin say: 'We have attained to faith.' Say [to them]: 'Believers you are not. Rather say, 'We have submitted ourselves', for true faith has not entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste. God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful.' True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word. Say: 'Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything.' They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: 'Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.' God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do.* (Verses 14–18)

The first of these verses is said to have been revealed in relation to the Bedouins of the Asad tribe who, as soon as they accepted Islam, boasted saying, 'We have attained to faith.' They even counted this as a favour they performed for the Prophet. They said to him: "Messenger of God! We have become Muslims. Other Arabs have fought you, but we have not." God wanted to show them the truth of what was in their hearts when they said this, stating that they only embraced Islam in submission while the truth of faith had not touched their hearts or souls. "*Say [to them]: 'Believers you are not. Rather say, "We have submitted ourselves", for true faith has not entered your hearts.*'" (Verse 14)

Nevertheless, God's grace has dictated that they will be rewarded for every good action they do, letting nothing go to waste. Even the outward manifestation of Islam, which has not yet penetrated into people's hearts to become genuine faith, is sufficient to make their

good deeds count and be recorded. Thus, their deeds are not wasted like those of unbelievers. No part of their reward is wasted as long as they continue to obey: "*If you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste.*" (Verse 14) This is because God is quick to grant forgiveness and bestow His mercy. He accepts from His servant the first step and rewards him for submission and obedience while waiting until faith settles in his heart: "*God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful.*" (Verse 14)

God then explains to them the nature of genuine belief: "*True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word.*" (Verse 15)

True faith, then, means that deep in one's heart one believes in God and His Messenger, admitting no doubt or faltering. It is a solid, unshaken belief that allows no hesitation or oscillation. Moreover, it is a belief that motivates people to strive hard for God's cause, sacrificing their possessions and their lives. When a person's heart experiences the beauty of this belief and has the reassurance bred by such experience, he or she will take the necessary action to establish its meaning beyond their own hearts and souls, i.e. in real human life. They want to bring about union and harmony between the truth of faith they feel in their hearts and what takes place in the world around them. They simply will not tolerate any discordance between faith and practice, because such discordance jars at every moment. Hence, striving for God's cause, laying down one's life and possessions in order to achieve its goals. It is, then, a self-motivated action that aims to transfer the bright and enlightened image one sees in one's heart into practical human life. The rift between a believer and the worldly life around him based on *jāhiliyyah* is an inherent rift caused by the fact that a believer cannot lead a life of double standards, one based on faith and the other on people's practices. Similarly, he cannot give up his sound and beautiful concept of faith in favour of a practical model that is deficient, ugly and deviant. Hence, a confrontation with ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, is inevitable, until it gives up and adopts the light of faith.

"*Those are the ones who are true to their word.*" (Verse 15) They are true in their faith, and true to their claims that they are believers. Unless those feelings in a believer's heart are a reality, bringing tangible effects into practical life, faith remains theoretical.

We need to reflect a little on the precautionary note in this verse: "*True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt.*" (Verse 15) This point about never entertaining doubt is not a merely additional clause. It points to a real experience and provides treatment for a condition that may arise even after one has truly believed. The way this is phrased is significant, *'and never then entertained any doubt.'* A similar precautionary note is seen in the verse that says: "*Those who say, 'Our Lord is God,' and then steadfastly pursue the right way…*" (41: 30) The need to entertain no doubt and the need for the steadfast pursuit of the right way points to what a believing soul may experience under severe pressure and testing hardship. Doubt or hesitation may creep in. A believer may have to deal with severely testing times and calamities that shake the very foundation of his world. Hence, the one who remains steadfast, entertaining no doubt and pursuing the right way in all situations is the one who deserves high rank with God.

Putting the fact in this way alerts believers' hearts to the slips and risks in their way. This enables them to take precautions, prepare themselves to withstand any hardship that comes their way, and maintain their course even in the face of the most adverse circumstances.

The *sūrah* continues its address to the Bedouins, telling them that God knows what is in their hearts. Furthermore, He can tell them what they harbour in their minds, without waiting for them to tell Him:

> *Say: Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything.* (Verse 16)

Man may profess to have knowledge, yet he neither knows nor understands himself or his feelings. The human mind does not know how it works because it cannot monitor its own working. When the mind monitors itself, it stops working naturally, and thus it has nothing

to monitor. When it performs its natural work, the human mind cannot at the same time do any monitoring. Hence it is unable to know its own nature or how it functions. Yet it is his mind that man boasts of, giving it a superior status.

"*God knows all that is in the heavens and earth.*" (Verse 16) His is a perfect knowledge that comprehends the very nature of everything in the heavens and the earth. His knowledge is not based on appearances and effects, but on a perfect knowledge of the nature of things that is independent of time and free of any limitation. Moreover, "*God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 16) This encompasses the entire universe and everything in it.

**God's Real Favour**

Having explained the true nature of faith, the *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet, referring to those Bedouins and how they asserted that they had done the Prophet a favour by accepting Islam. This very action is clear evidence that the nature of faith had not yet penetrated their hearts. They had not yet experienced the beauty of faith:

> *They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: 'Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.'* (Verse 17)

This answer clearly tells them that they cannot hold this as a favour and that if they truly believe, then they owe a great favour to God who has guided them to it.

We should reflect on this answer, because it highlights a very important fact, one that most people, including some believers, overlook. Faith is the supreme favour God grants to anyone of His servants on earth. It is indeed greater than man's very existence, which is a favour God grants to man in the first place. It is also superior to what relates to existence, such as the provision of sustenance, health and adornment. It is the favour that gives human existence a distinctive entity, and assigns to man a great role in the system of the universe.

The first thing that faith gives man, when it settles firmly in his heart, is a broader vision of the universe, how it relates to him, and his role in it; an accurate criterion with which to know the essence of values, people and events; genuine reassurance as he embarks on his journey through this planet up to the time when he meets his Lord; a friendly relation with everything around him in the universe; a warm, interactive relationship with God who has created him and the universe; a feeling that he is honoured and that he is fulfilling an important role to please God and to bring goodness to this universe and to all who live in it. A manifestation of this broad vision is that man breaks out of the narrow confinements of his own small and weak entity to function on the stage of the universe, with all its inherent forces and secrets.

In relation to his own kind, man is an individual of a humanity that goes back to a single origin, which, in the first place, acquired its distinction from God's spirit which was breathed into this creature made of clay so as to bring him into contact with the divine light. This is a light that is not confined to a heaven or earth, has neither a beginning nor an end, and knows no limit of time or place. It is this free factor that has made man what he is. It is enough that this concept is properly appreciated by man in order that he begins to have a better appreciation of his position of honour and to feel this light, even as he walks on earth. His heart will then certainly have wings of light to carry him to the original source of light that gives his life its distinctive character.

In as far as his affiliation is concerned, he, as an individual, belongs to the single community of believers that stretches over the centuries, forming a noble procession led by Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad and their brethren prophets [peace be upon them all]. When this fact is fully appreciated by anyone, they feel themselves to be a branch of a great tree with deep roots and widely stretching boughs. This feeling gives believers a different taste of life, one that imparts to it a sense of nobility.

Man's vision thus becomes even broader so as to transcend his own entity, his community and the human race as a whole. He begins to see this whole existence as it originates with God, from the breathing of whose spirit he has become a man. His faith then tells him that this universe is a living entity, composed of countless other living entities.

Everything in this universe, including the universe itself, has a spirit. Like his own spirit, all these spirits turn to their Creator with prayer, glorification, praise, submission and obedience. Thus, in this universe, a believer feels himself to be an inseparable part of a complete whole. He belongs to his Creator, his soul turns to Him and he eventually returns to Him. Thus, he feels himself to be bigger and greater than his own limited world. He is bigger in relation to his vision of this great universe. He thus feels befriended by all the spirits around him, and beyond that befriended by God who looks after him. He then feels himself able to have a bond with this universe and to grow in stature in relation to it. He can do many things, initiate great events, influence and be influenced by all around him, and can derive strength from the Supreme Power that initiated him as well as all forces and powers in the universe. That is the Power that never weakens, shrinks or disappears.

### All For a Definite Purpose

From this broad vision a believer derives new standards and criteria to evaluate things, events, people, concerns, values and goals. He recognizes his true role in the universe and his task in this life. He looks at himself as a manifestation of God's will who sets him on his course to bring about whatever end He has determined. Thus, a believer continues his life on earth with clear vision, steady step and easy conscience. This knowledge gives believers what they feel of serenity, reassurance and delight with what takes place around them, including what happens to them. They have true answers to their questions: Where have they come from, and why? Where are they going, and what will they find there? They know that they are in this life for a particular purpose, and that whatever happens to them serves to bring about that purpose. They know that this life is the testing ground for the life to come; that they will be requited for every action they do, major or minor, and that they have not been created in vain, will not be abandoned or left to travel alone.

When we have such knowledge, all worries, doubts and feelings of insecurity disappear. After all, they are due to ignorance, on the part of those expressing or experiencing them, of our origin and destiny,

unawareness of what lies ahead in our way, and lack of trust in the purpose behind our existence and life journey. We will have no more feelings like those described by 'Umar al-Khayyām who says:

> Into this universe and *why* not knowing
> Nor, *whence*, like willy-nilly flowing;
> And out of it as wind along the waste,
> I know not *wither*, willy-nilly blowing.

Believers know that they wear the garment of life by God's will, and that God runs the universe, conducting all its affairs, with wisdom and knowledge. They also know that the hand that made them wear this garment is much wiser and more compassionate than they. Hence, there is no need to consult others, because they could not give a sound opinion like that which belongs to the Owner of that hand who knows all and sees all. They know that they are given this garment of life to wear in order to fulfil a certain role in the universe, being influenced by, and leaving their own influence on all things in it. This role is harmonious with all the other roles assigned to all other creatures from the beginning of life to its end.

Thus believers know why they have come to this life and to where they are heading. They do not experience any loss as they try to understand. They complete their journey, fulfilling their role, with trust and reassurance. They may even attain a higher degree of faith that enables them to carry on with their journey and the fulfilment of their role, with delight and happiness, feeling the great bounty God has given them. This is the bounty of life, or its garment, given to them by God, the most generous, the compassionate. This is the bounty of their role, which they fulfil regardless of what they may encounter of hardship, until they return to their Lord.

Similarly, feelings like those I myself experienced during a period of loss and worry also disappear. That was before I began to live 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān', when God took me by the hand and placed me under His blessed care. These were feelings that my tired soul imparted at the time to the entire universe and I expressed those feelings in poetry saying:

The universe stood there, not knowing which way it should go;
And why, and where, if at all, it should go;
It is all a waste, a child's play, and an aimless effort;
And it ends up in a masked destiny that gives no satisfaction.

Today, however, I know that, by God's grace, there is no aimless effort or wasted action, because every action and every effort will have its fruits and gain its reward. That same destiny will also give great satisfaction, because it is left to the One who is most just, most merciful. I also feel today, by the grace of God, that the universe never stands in that miserable position, because the soul of the universe believes in its Lord, turns to Him in glorification and praise. The universe operates in accordance with the law God has set for it, obedient, contented and submissive.

This is a great gain in the realm of feeling and thought, in the physical world of body and mind, as well as in the practical world of action and mutual influence.

Besides, faith is a great motivating force. When it is settled in a person's heart, it begins to work, fulfil itself and bring about perfect harmony between its inner image and its appearance. It takes control over all human motivations and harnesses them along the way. This is the secret of the strength of faith in the human soul and the power one gains through faith. It is the secret underlying the miracles faith has achieved in this world, and continues to achieve every day: miracles that change the whole appearance of life from one day to another. It is faith that motivates both the individual and the community to sacrifice their lives on earth in order to gain success in the greater and everlasting life to come. Furthermore, it is faith that gives an ordinary individual, with little or no support, the means to stand up to oppressive forces and to both temptation and persecution. All these forces are easily vanquished when they face the motivating power of faith in the heart of a single believer. It is not the individual that achieves success over all these forces; it is the great power that derives from the spirit of faith which is akin to a powerfully flowing and inexhaustible spring.

The miracles achieved through faith in the life of the individual and the community do not rely on mysterious myth, vision or superstition.

Instead, they are the result of well-defined causes and well-established rules. Faith is holistic: it is the force that establishes the relationship between man and the apparent and subtle forces in the universe, giving his soul trust and reassurance. It also gives the believer the ability to confront worldly powers and situations with the strength of one who is certain of victory, trusting to God's help. It makes it clear to the individual believer his relations with other people, events and situations, outlining for him his direction, way and goal. It harnesses all his strengths and potentials to direct them all to a clear goal, so that he moves towards it with force, confidence and reassurance.

What makes faith doubly powerful is that it operates along the same line that the universe follows in its deep and surface parts. Indeed, all the powers that work in the universe follow a direction set by faith. Thus, as they move along their way, believers meet these powers in their great march to give the truth its victory over falsehood, no matter how powerful the latter may appear.

God certainly tells the truth as He says: "*They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.*" (Verse 17) Indeed faith is the supreme favour that can only be granted by God the Bounteous to whomever He knows to be deserving of it.

God certainly tells the truth! Does anyone who has had the privilege of knowing all these facts, meanings and feelings, experienced them to the full and lived through them in this present world ever feel that he has missed out on anything? Conversely, what does the one who misses out on all these gain, even though he may live in comfort and luxury? He may eat as he pleases, but animals also eat, although animals are better off because by their nature they submit to their Lord and turn towards their Creator.

> *God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do.* (Verse 18)

The One who knows all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth also knows what is hidden in people's innermost souls. He knows people's

feelings and sees what they do. He does not derive His knowledge from the words they say, but from the feelings they harbour in their hearts and the actions that confirm their feelings.

Thus we come to the conclusion of this *sūrah*, comprising 18 verses, but delineating the features of a noble and pure world, outlining great truths and establishing them in people's inner consciences.